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True story with intrigue of fiction

Mole, by William Hood. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 317 pp. $15.95.

By Burke Wilkinson

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In everyday English: Margarita Tairova's passport was made by a skillful forger. But the mobile team spotted and followed her at the Kennedy Airport, although there was some question whether this target-on-the-run knew she had been spotted.

This fascinating true story bristles with technical phrases like the one above, but they only add to the overpowering air of credibility about the secret world of "Mole."

Margarita Tairova is not the central figure, but the fact that she was discovered while trying to slip into the United States was central to the downfall of Lt. Col. Pyotr Popov, the first Russian intelligence officer recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Right from the start Popov was an unusual mole. Normally a mole is a defector-in-place, continuing his regular duties for his country, while serving its enemy. GRU officer Popov, peasant by birth and with a good combat record in World War II, offered his services to the US by simply writing a letter in Russian and tossing it into the back seat of a car belonging to an American Foreign Service officer stationed in Vienna. The time: 1952, when the Austrian capital was still under four-power occupation, and each major mission was stuffed with spies.

Popov's letter offered to supply some fairly routine order-of-battle information, named a night rendezvous, and asked a modest price for the information.

There was always the chance that this was a crank letter, or that the author was a double agent. But the American intelligence staff was intrigued – and badly in need of a break.

The case officer assigned to Popov learned a lot in their first meeting. Popov's job in the GRU (a branch of the more powerful KGB) was a fairly modest one, in control of six agents. Nevertheless, in the course of the next six years he "trundled bales of top secret information out of the secret centers of Soviet power. In the process he shattered the Soviet military intelligence service . . . and saved the US half a billion dollars in military research."

Popov, it turned out, had made his decision because he hated the Soviet high command for what it had done to the peasantry, whose lot was – and is – if anything worse than in czarist times. In the safe houses where the frequent rendezvous took place, he revealed his very soul in a way that totally convinced his listeners. But he was careless, almost reckless, in his failure to take the most routine precautions for his own safety.

Hear him toward the end of the six years, as the shadows gather. His American friends are urging him to escape before his treason is uncovered at last:

"I'm a Russian and it's my country and my land. It belongs to me just as much as it does to those . . . party people. How can I run when they're all stuck there – my family, my brothers, my sister? Sooner or later there'll be a war. If you win, the peasants win. The only way I can help is by working with you. I'm a Russian, and I'll die a Russian, in Russia. . . ."

On what turned out to be his last meeting, Popov leafed through the pages of his favorite Western magazine, the American Farm Journal. The case officer again urges him to come over to freedom. Popov shakes his head.

"Maybe I'm making a mistake. I'd sure like to see one of these farms and all of that equipment they're using." And then, with the lopsided grin that had endeared him to the Americans: "I'll be mad . . . if it turned out to be propaganda you've printed just to fool a simple Russian *muzhik* [peasant] like me."

We learn that it was Popov who tipped off his new friends about Margarita Tairova's secret mission to America. It seems she did indeed sense that she was being followed, and informed her Soviet masters. The evidence, along with other compelling clues, pointed to Popov as the only man who could have passed the word along. Popov was ordered to report home to Moscow, and the grim process of breaking him began.

William Hood, CIA careerist and born writer, uses his intimate firsthand knowledge of Popov's remarkable career to give us the most absorbing book on spying in many a year.

Burke Wilkinson, author of four novels of suspense, is also the editor of "Cry Spy!," an anthology of 20th-century espionage.

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